

COMPUTER SYSTEM WITH ACCESS CONTROL MECHANISM

Prior Foreign Application

This application claims priority from Japanese patent application number 11-374923, filed December 28, 1999,
5 which is hereby incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

Technical Field

The present invention relates to a computer system whereby a number of users on a network are enabled to use
10 data in common, and relates in particular to a computer system whereby access rights to such data are easily granted.

Background Art

As development of the Internet and groupware
15 environments has progressed, an exchange of electronic data has been more and more frequently performed, not only between individuals, but also among members within a company in various business transactions. For example, electronic data for various slips, contracts and other
20 documents may be exchanged by users within a specific area. Since such data are often used in common by a number of different users for convenience, data access management procedures must be established to provide protection for the data and to prevent unauthorized or
25 illegal use by outsiders.

Generally, a person in charge of controlling data access rights (called a manager) is responsible for providing an appropriate level of access management. For example, an original author or creator who has created a specific document file, or a person who is authorized to grant a right to access the file (hereinafter collectively referred to as a "granter"), designates the users or user groups who should be permitted to use the document file for the manager (the manager may also be the granter). Then, the manager enters and records the designated permissions by granters in a system, so that only the designated users can access the document file. That is, users can not refer to data that are used in common by multiple users until after they have been granted permission to access such data by the granter directly or through the manager, as well as after they have been reported reference information for data they want to access.

It should be noted that when the term "report (transmit or notify of) reference information" is used hereinafter, it does not mean transmission of data per se. It means transmission of information that is required to access such data. While the detailed operations differ depending on the function of applications that are employed, "reporting reference data" corresponds, for example, to transmission of database icons which are created within an electronic mail by using a NOTES system, a groupware product that is available from Lotus Development Corp.

In certain case, wherein a number of persons are authorized to grant access rights for the same data, each person so authorized can arbitrarily select users to whom data access rights are to be granted. Therefore, it tends
5 to be difficult to trace and specifically identify the authorizing person who approved access rights to a specific user.

In the real world, it is assumed that the right to access a specific document is granted a person when he or
10 she receives the document. For example, when an author A hands a specific document to person B, since the author A has in effect granted person B permission to read the document (= grants an access right), person B can read the document (= can actually access or refer to). That is, in
15 normal transactions in the real world, the granting of access rights to data and the act of referring to the data can be performed at the same time. However, in a conventional computer system, before a user is permitted to refer to data, permission to access the data must be
20 provided for the user. That is, in a conventional computer system, since permission to access data must be granted in advance, one more extra step is required than is needed in the real world situation.

Further, in the real world, the history of granting
25 access permission can be understood by tracing the route from which a document is obtained. But in a conventional computer system, since the record of procedures by which access permission is granted is not retained, or is retained only as a time log for the whole data, it is

difficult to trace historical data concerning who approved the granting of access permission for specific data.

Summary of the Invention

5 An object of the present invention is to provide a computer system for controlling access rights concisely in an environment wherein a number of users on a network use data in common.

10 The present invention resolves the above problem. More specifically, when the reference information for data to be used in common is transmitted in communication such as an electronic mail from a granter to another user, information including the name of target data and of the user who is permitted to access the data is automatically obtained and a command granting access rights is
15 automatically issued, so that access management data can be updated in the process of user communication. The access management system includes: an access management table for managing the access right information; and a control unit for processing this table. Upon receiving
20 the access right command, the system automatically updates the table value. The access rights to be granted can be set to provide various levels of access (READ permission only, etc.) by using a standard value (default value) or a value set by the granter. In addition, information
25 concerning the originator who transmitted the mail (= the granter) is also automatically obtained, and data concerning who approved the access to the pertinent data are stored in the access management table. As a result,

the route by which the data is acquired is also easily ascertained.

More specifically, the present invention is implemented as a computer system with a mechanism for
5 controlling access to data to be used in common by multiple users comprises data storage for storing the data in common, an access management table including access management data for controlling a right to access the data in common, and control means for updating the access
10 management data, in response to communication forwarded by a user who is authorized to grant an access right.

The access management data in the access management table may include identification information for data to be accessed, identification information for a user who is
15 granted access rights, access level information and identification information for the user who grants the access rights. Since the control means may update the access management data upon the receipt of a command that is issued during the above mentioned communication, the
20 grant process can be more easily performed.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The subject matter which is regarded as the invention is particularly pointed out and distinctly claimed in the claims at the conclusion of the specification. The
25 foregoing and other objects, features, and advantages of the invention are apparent from the following detailed

description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which:

Fig. 1 is a block diagram for explaining the system arrangement including a computer system according to the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a diagram for explaining an access management table for determining the access rights granted for common data.

Fig. 3 is a flowchart for explaining a process performed by a data access control method according to the present invention.

[Description of the Symbols]

- 10: Server system
- 11: Data storage unit
- 12: Common data
- 13: Table storage unit
- 14: Access management table
- 15: Control unit
- 16: User terminal

Best Mode for Carrying Out the Invention

The preferred embodiment of the present invention will now be described. Fig. 1 is a block diagram for explaining the arrangement of a communication system that includes the computer system of the present invention. In Fig. 1, a server system 10 according to this invention

comprises a data storage unit 11, a table storage unit 13,
and a control unit 15. The data storage unit 11 stores
common data 12, as well as other data. When the server
system 10 also serves as a mail server, the data storage
unit 11 can also store mail data for each user. The table
storage unit 13 stores various control tables, such as an
access management table 13 which is a table for
controlling data access information. The control unit 15
receives requests from a user terminal 16, which also
serves as a client system, and adds to, deletes or updates
table data held in the table storage unit 13. Further,
the server system 10, when serving as a mail server,
performs predetermined mail processing. Although only two
user terminals 16 are shown in Fig. 1 to avoid complexity
in the drawing, more terminals may be connected via a LAN,
the Internet or another network. In addition, although
the communication system is arranged as a client-server
model system, it may also be set up as another system.
While the data storage unit 11 and the table storage unit
14 are separately provided, they may be provided as a
single unit, or they may be broken down into more units,
as in a distributed model system. Furthermore, while the
control unit 15 is positioned in the server system 10, it
may instead be positioned in another system (e.g., in a
client terminal), so long as it is authorized to operate
the table.

A specific user or group employing the user terminal
16 can access the common data 12 within the permitted
limits as specified in the access management table 14.
Management of such access can be performed by the control

unit 15. For example, when user B accesses data X, the control unit 15 of the server system 10 checks the contents of the access management table 14. In this case, if the access rights for data X are granted to user B, then user B is permitted to access the data, and if access rights are not granted, then access to the data by user B is inhibited. Generally, the contents of the access management table 14 are determined in advance by a granter (e.g. an author or creator of the target data) or a manager, who can determine the access rights to the pertinent data.

According to the present invention, the access management table 14 is automatically updated when a granter transmits an e-mail to a predetermined user. Therefore, the granter (or the manager) does not need to update the table in advance. This operation will now be described while referring to Fig. 1. First, assume that user A is a granter authorized to grant an access right to data X and that user B is, upon receipt of an e-mail transmitted by user A, granted access permission for the data X referred to in the e-mail. In this case, since the e-mail that user A prepares for user B includes reference information for the data X, user B is thereby notified that the target data X are available and can be accessed. In this invention, when an e-mail is transmitted, a command (table update command) is created and issued to update the contents of the access management table 14. This command may include, as parameters, the identification information of target data (X), the user who is permitted access (B) and the granter (A), and the

permission level (e.g. READ only permission). Upon receiving the table update command, the control unit 15 rewrites the contents of the table 14, and as a result, the right to access data X is granted user B. Since user
5 B is thus granted the right to access data X when he or she receives the mail from user A based on the reference information included in the e-mail, user B can immediately access the data X.

In the above explanation, the command is created and
10 issued at the user terminal upon transmission of an e-mail. However, the control unit of the server system may update the table in accordance with a request from the user. For example, when the server system 10 also
15 functions as a mail server, it may perform corresponding table processing in accordance with designation by a user transmitting an e-mail.

Fig. 2 is a diagram for explaining the access
management table to determine the access rights for common
data. In Fig. 2, entered in a data ID column 21 are
20 unique data identifiers assigned for each data sets;
entered in a user ID column 22 are the names of users or
user groups for which the access right levels for the data
have been specified; entered in an authorized level column
23 are access right levels that are specified for the
25 corresponding users or user groups; and entered in a
granter column 24 are the names of the granters who
granted the access rights to the corresponding users or
user groups. Since the creator of data owns access right
for such data and receives no access rights from anyone,

in the granter column 24 there is either no entry or the same user name is entered as the one that is shown in the user ID column 22. When a notification of reference information concerning specific data is transmitted, the user who transmits the pertinent notification is entered in the granter column 24, and the user who receives the notification is entered in the user ID column 22. In a system that does not particularly require a history of the granting of access rights, the granter column 24 in the access management table is not required. Further, in the authorized level column 23 in Fig. 2, only two entry types: "WRITE/DEL" (writable/deletable) and "READ" (readable) are shown. However, another arbitrary setup, such as a parameter that permits the transmission (FORWARD) of data to another user, may be included in column 23. In this case, if no particular value is entered, "READ" (FORWARD disabled) is set as a default value, while if a specific value for transmission is entered, an arbitrary value can be set.

Fig. 3 is a flowchart for explaining the data access control method of this invention. The process shown in Fig. 3 is performed by the control unit 15. First, upon receipt of a request from the user terminal 16, a check is performed to determine whether reference information for the common data 12 is included in a communication or in an e-mail that is transmitted to a specific user or user group (step 31). When a command including a predetermined parameter is issued as described in above, it is determined that the reference process is required, and the parameter information is employed as the reference

information for the common data. When the reference
process is required, program control goes to step 32,
whereat the contents of the access management table 14 are
checked to determine whether access rights have already
5 been granted to the recipient of the communication. When
access rights have already been granted, no further
process is performed. But when access rights have not yet
been granted, at step 33, the data ID 21, the user ID 22,
the authorized level 23, and the granter 24 shown in Fig.
10 2 are entered in the access management table 14 in
accordance with the reference information requested by the
user. As a result, at the time of transmission of an
e-mail, access rights can be provided for a recipient, and
a record covering a history of granting access rights can
15 be retained.

As is described above, according to the present
invention, control for accessing data for a specific user
or user group can be provided by an easy operation, and
the efficiency of the process can be improved. Further,
20 since precise data concerning a person who is authorized
to grant access rights (a granter) are available, a route
along which data are acquired can be easily grasped.

The present invention can be included in an article
of manufacture (e.g., one or more computer program
25 products) having, for instance, computer usable media.
The media has embodied therein, for instance, computer
readable program code means for providing and facilitating
the capabilities of the present invention. The article of

manufacture can be included as a part of a computer system or sold separately.

5 Additionally, at least one program storage device readable by a machine, tangibly embodying at least one program of instructions executable by the machine to perform the capabilities of the present invention can be provided.

10 The flow diagrams depicted herein are just examples. There may be many variations to these diagrams or the steps (or operations) described therein without departing from the spirit of the invention. For instance, the steps may be performed in a differing order, or steps may be added, deleted or modified. All of these variations are considered a part of the claimed invention.

15 Although preferred embodiments have been depicted and described in detail herein, it will be apparent to those skilled in the relevant art that various modifications, additions, substitutions and the like can be made without departing from the spirit of the invention and these are therefore considered to be within the scope
20 of the invention as defined in the following claims.